

I Want My Scalps

Fighting a new generation of white nationalism in the military

by Capt Julia Quinn

In early 2009, a team from the Department of Homeland Security completed a nine-page intelligence assessment on extremist domestic terrorism, meant for limited release to local law enforcement agencies across the nation. Instead, it was leaked to the media and chaos reigned.¹ A section proposing a direct link between the economic downturn and the radicalization of returning combat veterans toward domestic terrorism became primetime material on cable news and even sparked a Congressional investigation that lasted through June 2009.² The Department, scrambling to save face, disowned the report less than a week after it was leaked, and it soon disappeared into the oblivion of the 24-hour news cycle.

The report was not revolutionary to anyone familiar with domestic terrorism; among those who attempt to commit terrorism, the successful actors will naturally be those who have experience with firearms, explosives, and who remain disciplined in chaotic situations. Furthermore, it is well-established that the infinitesimally small percentage of veterans who become radicalized are more likely to join organizations that fetishize military experience: specifically, white nationalist organizations. A 2008 report released by the Federal Bureau of Investigation noted that while Iraq and Afghanistan veterans were not joining known white nationalist groups at a rate that stemmed the national decline of such organizations, those who did quickly became prominent leaders of the community.³ A common denominator across the spectrum of white nationalist organizations is that “military experience—often regardless of its length or type—distinguishes one within the extremist movement.”

At the time of the release of these two reports, the white nationalist movement

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numbered, according to FBI estimates, in the “low thousands.” It was mostly comprised of groups that still depended on an older generation’s networking tactics: newspapers, fliers, phone banking, town hall meetings, and other recruitment efforts that focused on in-person contact. Such tactics made it difficult to maintain a level of complexity and violent capability without attracting the attention of law enforcement. While websites, such as *The Daily Stormer*, thrived amongst virulent followers, they were not effective recruiting tools for people unfamiliar with the movement. For all the intensity of their hatred, white nationalist groups were on the decline, and there was little bite to follow their bark. Military leadership, focused on the surge of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans returning to civilian life, were not concerned with the miniscule presence of veterans in the white nationalist community, and there is no recorded military response to either the FBI or the Department of Homeland Security reports.

Over a decade later, however, the white nationalist landscape has radically changed, and the enemy that military leadership has to fight has come to resemble the same non-state actors we face overseas. The 2017 Unite the Right rally, heavily advertised on social media, signaled the arrival of the new generation of white nationalism in America and resulted in one murder and over 30 injuries. While many of the participating groups had been hoping to rebrand white nationalism into a voter-

friendly political platform through the rally, the movement fractured in the wake of the violence, and most of the prominent groups lost their primary social media platforms in a wave of bans. But the social underground of 2017, when 77 percent of American adults owned a smartphone, was different than that of 2008.⁴ No longer dependent on anonymous fliers or coded newspaper ads, white nationalism flourished across Internet and the so-called “Dark Web,” the native environment of Millennial and Generation Z activists. While the tactics have evolved with the times, much has not changed: white nationalist groups still seek the recruitment of both active duty service members and veterans. In 2019, when the database for the Neo-Nazi forum *Iron March* was leaked, forum posts revealed the common desire of members to join the military or recruit their fellow service members to the cause:

Imagine a modern cross between the Silvershirts and NA [National Alliance], with a larger movement built around a small, dedicated Actiongroup who are required to attend meetings at least once a month and be as fit as Marines.⁵

According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, the number of white nationalist organizations reached an all-time high in 2018, at 148 different groups with a national presence, compared to only 67 in 2000.⁶ All extremist murders tracked by the Anti-Defamation League in 2018 were primarily motivated by or had links to white nationalist ideology.⁷ But despite 36 percent of service members reporting to *Military Times* that they have seen signs of white nationalism within the military, military leadership been too hesitant to confront the issue.⁸ There are campaigns to combat and raise aware-

ness of other controversial issues, such as sexual assault, alcohol abuse, suicide, and domestic violence. Service members have regular training warning us that foreign forces may try to recruit them and are given examples of what might constitute signs of an insider threat.

But aside from our public relations statements when service members are exposed as active white nationalists, there is no acknowledgement of a growing movement that is actively looking to recruit young service members and veterans. Racially-motivated disinformation campaigns have spread across sites used by over 90 percent of Americans aged 18 to 24, such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat,⁹ sites that have been reluctant to implement standardized practices to mitigate its growth.¹⁰ Junior service members are the prime targets for such propaganda, and thanks to ever-sophisticated algorithms and the purposefully addictive nature of social media itself, white nationalist recruiters can overwhelm a captive audience with crowd-tested racist propaganda. In the absence of any clear messaging or training on the topic, service members can quickly become accustomed to the recruitment campaigns of these groups without even realizing they are being targeted by the same algorithms that fomented Charlottesville.

If the past four years are any indication, these campaigns have been successful. In May 2017, two Marines were arrested in North Carolina for trespassing, after attempting to affix a large banner with a white supremacist slogan to a public building. In the immediate aftermath of the Charlottesville riots, two Marine veterans involved with organizing the white nationalist groups (including one who had been a recruiter less than nine months prior) were arrested and charged with felony assault.¹¹ A third Marine, an active duty lance corporal, was arrested after he appeared at yet another white nationalist rally in Tennessee in October 2017; after investigation, it was revealed that the same lance corporal had participated in violence at Charlottesville and bragged about his actions online.¹² In February 2019, as federal authorities

arrested avowed white nationalist and Coast Guard LT Christopher Hasson on drugs and weapons charges, another lance corporal was investigated after media reports linked him to a racist Twitter account, which had shared content from white nationalist organizations.¹³ In April 2019, a *Huffington Post* investigation into leaked Discord chat room transcripts linked eleven service members to Identity Evropa, including one active duty lance corporal and two Marine reservists.¹⁴ Even as racial justice protests swept the nation in the spring of 2020, an Air Force staff sergeant was arrested for the murder of a Santa Cruz sheriff's deputy and was later revealed to be motivated by the "Boogaloo" movement, a decentralized white nationalist ideology that hopes to inspire a civil war in which the

of those who would betray the nation in favor of white supremacy, was flown in the Capitol while armed rioters with clothing bearing antisemitic slogans such as "Camp Auschwitz" roamed the halls. While investigation is ongoing by both the Department of Justice and the DOD, one of the first rioters identified was a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel, who was not only wearing a flak jacket and Kevlar helmet but was carrying zip ties intended for binding the wrists of hostages when he stormed the Senate chambers alongside men who were carrying Nazi and Confederate flags. The rioter who was killed during the siege was later identified as an Air Force veteran who had embraced the antisemitic "QAnon" conspiracy theory, and another active duty Army captain has now been placed under in-

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"white race" will emerge victorious.¹⁵ Shortly after the staff sergeant's arrest, the Department of Justice unsealed its indictment of an Army Private who had conspired to send classified information about the 173d Airborne Brigade to a Neo-Nazi group, with the explicit intent to aid them in planning a violent terrorist attack against his own unit.¹⁶

Dismissal of these events as non-threatening is no longer an option in the wake of the violent attack on our Capitol on 6 January. The mob that breached the central building of the world's oldest sovereign democracy was made of many disparate groups from across the country, but their common denominator was their embrace of violent far-right extremism, with white supremacy as a central tenant of the majority of participating groups, including the Proud Boys, the Groyper Army, neo-Confederate groups, and at least one neo-Nazi street gang known as the Nationalist Social Club. For the first time in history, the Confederate battle flag, a symbol

investigation for her participation in riots. According to a preliminary analysis, nearly twenty percent of those arrested for involvement in the siege served in the military. In the coming months, no one should feign surprise as more military personnel, whether active duty, reserve, or retired, are identified as those who have been radicalized into violently betraying their oaths of enlistment and office.

None of this activity occurred in a vacuum, and we cannot say we were not warned. In August 2019, Gen John Allen declared in a *Washington Post* op-ed what many independent civil rights watchdog groups had been urging for years: white nationalist terrorism must be considered an equal threat to the American mainland as ISIS.¹⁷ In early 2020, the FBI followed suit, ranking white nationalist terrorism as a "national threat priority," on equal footing with ISIS in its danger to American citizens.¹⁸ White nationalist activity has been confirmed in civil rights protests

in Minnesota, Virginia, Georgia, and DC, and in many cases, law enforcement has observed a pattern of white nationalists attempting to incite violence at otherwise peaceful protests.¹⁹ But military leadership has been hesitant to name this problem or do anything to explicitly acknowledge its existence; while the tacit ban of Confederate flags from military bases in summer 2020 was a tacit gesture that the Pentagon is aware of the problem, there is no unified message regarding the most dangerous terrorist threat on American soil, even in the wake of unprecedented violent terror attacks against our most precious institutions. This is a strategy that has been executed, and proven to fail, in many other controversial threats to our military in the past; most notably, the persistent refusal to acknowledge the epidemic of sexual assault amongst service members, until forced to by the landmark 2012 documentary *the Invisible War*. Less than five years later, military leadership was again supposedly shocked by the Marines United scandal, despite the fact that the group had over 30,000 members in an organization of less than 200,000. As our military enters the third decade of the 21st century, the danger of choosing to ignore a growing problem is only escalating as the availability of open-source media increases among the general population and our personnel.

Less than 50 years ago, Camp Pendleton hosted KKK meetings, and less than 40 years ago, Marines were photographed in Klan uniforms at a white supremacist rally.²¹ History has not been kind to those who chose to ignore those shameful episodes, and it will not be kind to us if we choose to remain silent and ignorant about the greatest domestic terror threat to the Americans we swore to protect. We must seize the opportunity to be the first to fight this enemy, or we will be forced to explain to our grandchildren why we chose to remain complicit. Our options to begin this battle are countless, and the only wrong choice is a failure to confront this issue with every resource at our disposal. We cannot allow the threat of white nationalism to infiltrate our ranks if we seek to uphold the values of the same

men and women who sacrificed their lives in the fight against it from 1941 to 1945; if we have done it once, we can do it again.

Notes

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